125 NEWBURY

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LYNDA BENGLIS

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SKELETONIZER n. (*plural* skeletonizers)
1. Any of various moths whose larva eats the parenchyma of leaves, leaving only the skeleton (the veins) behind.

SKELETONIZER

FREE PRESS

NATURE AS COLLABORATOR

Arne Glimcher

In Lynda Benglis's new body of work, nature is her collaborator. Made from abaca paper, bamboo reeds, and wire, these sculptures weigh almost nothing yet convey a powerful sense of mass and solidity that belies their lightness.

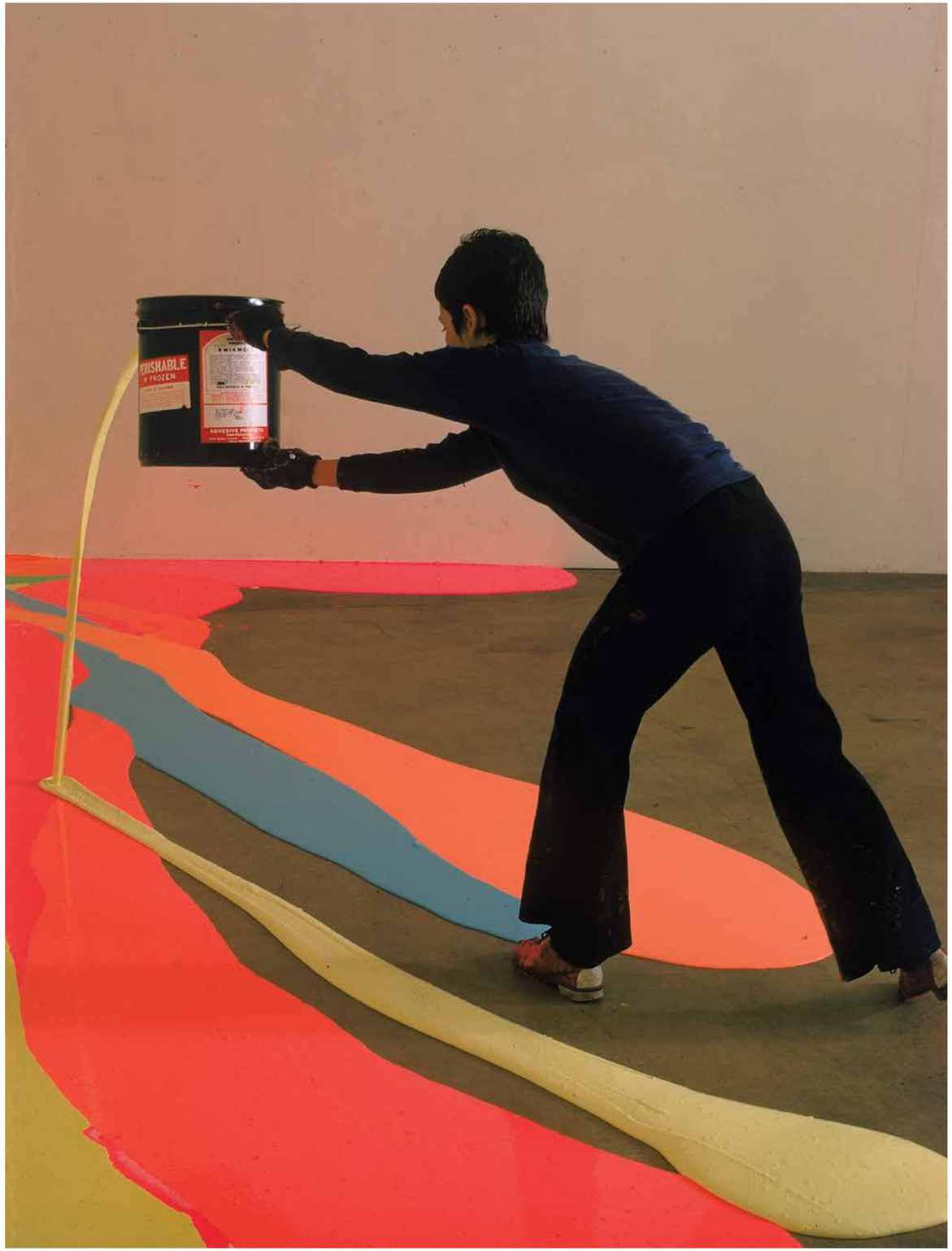
Benglis's sculptures begin in the papermill, where wet pulp is made into sheets of handmade paper. A skeletal structure of bamboo reeds or aluminum wire is laid down and sandwiched between the sheets, which are pressed and allowed to dry. In some cases, as they dry, the forms are exposed to the sun, the air, and the elements. In the process, the paper loses nearly half of its volume. As it shrinks, it curls and twists around its own internal skeleton, producing the finished form of the sculpture.

I'm interested in the idea that this shrinking process is catalyzed by the sun, by the elements of nature. Despite all that has been written about Benglis's relationship to Jackson Pollock and the idea of the "frozen gesture," the way she harnesses the forces of nature reminds me even more of the work Richard Serra.

Like Serra, Benglis's sculptures capture the energy of an earthquake. They feel to me like chunks of lava thrown into the air, defying gravity. Yet they are also the opposite of Serra. They exude a sense of mass yet somehow manage to levitate, alighting with astonishing delicacy inside the gallery like moths drawn to light reflecting off the walls. The result is phenomenal as much as material. These works are audacious in a way that makes me think not only of Serra, but also of Robert Irwin. Benglis's sculptures attune us to the space and to our own presence.

In the interview that is included in this issue of the *125 Newbury Free Press*, Benglis speaks about the experience of working with the "mush" of paper pulp—of transforming it into a solid—and of her fascination with softness and malleability going back to her childhood in Louisiana. "I think of crush and mush," she says of these new works, "I think of skin. I think of pulling—the plasticity. I think of this spontaneity in absorption. I think of the possibility of color and not color. I think of history. In fact, we wouldn't have history, really, in a certain way, without it. That history couldn't survive without paper. It's beyond context."

Benglis is the master orchestrator, the sage, the seer, whose lifetime of experimentation has allowed her to arrive at this extraordinary body of work, which I am honored to present in our seventh exhibition at 125 Newbury.



Lynda Benglis at work, University of Rhode Island, 1969. Originally reproduced in an article by David Bourdon titled "Fling, Dribble and Dip" published in *Life* magazine, February 27, 1970. Photograph: Henry Groskinsky

LYNDA BENGLIS: THE FROZEN GESTURE

Robert Pincus-Witten
1974

LYNDA BENGLIS CONTRIBUTES TO new options in American art—my reluctance to admit this is tied to her extravagance. Few talents today are so alert to the weights and balances of the actual moment as Benglis, and no artist seems more capricious, more casual. She appears to toss aside important realizations at the instant of their discovery. Rarely has the observation that art is about beginnings been more apt than in her case. In this sequence of feints and probes, Benglis stands in striking contrast to many of the major Minimalists of the '60s, who built their careers on one idea as an intense and committed demonstration of the continuing validity of a single option. In Benglis' apparent reluctance to remain with a problem taken to its most extenuated circumstances lies the notion that the artist evolves in disjunctive, not conjunctive, terms. Her formal volatility is her primary message and strength.[1]

Lynda Benglis left Louisiana in 1964 to continue her art studies at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. In 1969 she participated in a group exhibition at the Bykert Gallery with Richard Van Buren, Chuck Close, and David Paul. From May of that year to the present is hardly a long period. In terms of art, however, virtual generations have come and gone. The major shift of sensibility has been the emergence of a Post-Minimalist stance, first realized in the pictorial sculptures so well exemplified by Benglis' latex and foam works. Conceptual work and performances succeeded this pictorializing phase of sculpture, and these developments are reflected in Benglis' use of video and her current mannered erotic art.

In the Bykert show, Benglis exhibited a latex floor piece called *Bounce*. As Emily Wasserman described it:

> *Miss Benglis spills stains of liquid rubber in a freely flowing, twining mass directly onto the floor of the exhibition space, mixing fluorescent oranges, chartreuses, day-glo pinks, greens, and blues, allowing the accidents and puddlings of the material to harden into a viscous mass. The outer contours trace the natural flow of the latex and define the amoeba-like but self-contained field of this strange and startlingly colored spread. The method by which the piece was (non) formed is thus actually objectified while the events and timing of its process are congealed.*[2]

Calling *Bounce* a "protoplasmic mat," Wasserman recognized that the work was "a kind of painting entirely freed from an auxiliary ground or armature"—a free gesture gelled in space. Still, Wasserman had reservations about this new painterly episode in sculpture.

By now, it is clear that Benglis was answering the fusion of painting and sculpture that had taken place in the mid-'60s. The pictorial sculpture I refer to generally, and Benglis' particularly, furthered this fusion by making a new object which is the result of an Expressionist episode enacted directly upon the floor. Choosing this option, Benglis, like Van Buren, Hesse, Saret, Serra, and Sonnier, transposed the easel tradition questioned in Abstract Expressionism into an actual environmental enterprise.

Agreed: Pollock's career, from the '40s on, drifted in the direction of muralizing and wall-oriented ambitions. In addition to adumbrating the changed scale of American art, Pollock had keyed into an interest in eccentric process and substance as well. The most famous photograph of the artist, taken by Hans Namuth, shows him stepping into a canvas spread upon the floor. "Pollock pioneered the movement of dealing with materials used by the artist as the prime manifestation of imagery," said Benglis. "He drew with paint by dipping sticks into cans of liquid color and making an image on canvas placed on the floor, which was subsequently framed and hung. This was a new way of thinking."[3]

In Pollock's work, literary content was clued to ritual myth and jungian archetype, the figure of constant human meaning revealed in psychoanalysis. By contrast, such content in Benglis' work is inherent to substance. As Pollock's paintings grew larger, ultimately to wall scale, he was able to step into them during their execution as he might have entered a great hall of prehistoric painting. I believe the register of handprints in the upper right corner of *Number One*, 1948 (The Museum of Modern Art), reenacts for the jungian a major gesture of Paleolithic painting—the negative or positive handprints found, for example, throughout the caves of Peche Merle, Altamira, Lascaux or Santander.[4] It was important for Benglis to be in her latex and foam "pours" of 1968 during their execution as it was for Pollock to step into the paintings of his 1945–51 Jungian phase. And, once Benglis' works are exhibited, the spectator enjoys a similar access.

Simultaneous with the pours, Benglis was producing eccentric and narrow wax paintings. Klaus Kertess observed of these capsule-shaped works that, "pigmented wax was put on layer over layer with a brush of the same width as the support, creating an image of two brushstrokes coming together and splitting apart at the center." *Tulip* (1968) "evokes the waxy beauty of tulips or of lips (two lips, my lips)." Benglis said to me,

> *The wax paintings were like masturbating in my studio, nutshell paintings dealing with male/female symbols, the split and the coming together. They are both oral and genital. But I don't want to get Freudian; they're also Jungian, Ying-Yang.*

Benglis produced these covert wax paintings for some time, although after 1970, the cracked and fractured wax encrustations move toward high refief.

Benglis' identification with Pollock in terms of substance, procedure, and secret imagery came during a period when the nongestural side of Abstract Expressionism—the Rothko rather than the Pollock—was viewed as the paramount issue of progressive painting. Benglis sought a painterly episode derived from Abstract Expressionism and informed by the "collapsed" objects of Minimalism. Both these sources are important for her since they tend, in divergent ways, to isolate or excise the autonomous gesture from the ground.

The free gesture is the central notion of Benglis' art. Since the early '70s, she has understood "the frozen gesture," as she calls it to mean something both physical and psychological—psychological in the sense of a phrase like "it was a lovely gesture," or the term *beau geste*.

By 1970, Benglis was aware of new artistic models. After her latex throws, she turned to brightly colored polyurethane foam forms prefigured in Claes Oldenburg's more borborygmic soft sculptures of the early '60s. Benglis' floorbound puffy works only appear soft, however; actually they are hard crusted aerated bodies of plastic. "Oldenburg turned material and subject matter inside out," she said. "I don't like the recent Mickey Mouse stuff. Too Cubist. I like all his earlier work around '58 to '62." In addition, in 1970 Benglis became interested in day-glo pigment, pure color without black admixtures, and stabilized by ultraviolet resisters. Because of its high chromatic vibration and retinal irritation, day-glo sidesteps the usual issues of color, even though it is clearly hue. It tends to defy conventional color exploitation and the search for the subjective or personal palette of sensibility painting. Day-glo, tawdry and neon like, tends to celebrate the commercial and the commonplace, and this seeming vulgarity fascinates Benglis.

She wishes to "question what vulgarity is. Taste is context." Benglis, then, worked out of Pop sensibility, but freed of that movement's specific imagery.

I do not want my work to be iconographically Pop. I am still involved with abstraction. The first abstract paintings I ever thought about were some Klines shown at the Delgado Museum [in New Orleans]. Content grows out of form. Having an iconographic content can give me a form—say feminism, say Pop.

Day-glo offered the intensity most resistant to the floor—as Benglis remarked, the pigment "was down on the floor, but the color was up."

Despite its low-class associations, day-glo has been used even in the rarified high art ranges of formalist abstraction. After his metallic series—itself reflective, therefore "uncolored"—Frank Stella, for example, undertook a day-glo series of works. The color in Morris Louis' *Unfurled* series (although of a different chemical structure than day-glo), also provided Benglis with a formalist model of high key color. Moreover, Louis' gestures in the *Unfurled* paintings are similar to the spectrumlike arrangements of lambent stripes in Benglis' latex and foam pours.

Do not be misled. All this connection to other work (and to formalist art which, after all, was "the enemy"), is outside the essential interests of Benglis' works themselves. As glamour is Warhol's message and the star his icon, and the square, circle and triangle are the existential characters in the dramas of Minimalism, so is the frozen gesture—the excised, congealed, colored stroke—Benglis' prime fascination and essential icon.

Instead of figure/ground Gestalts functioning within a conventional rectangular field, the environment becomes the ground for the figure. By 1970, Benglis' pictorial sculptures no longer ratify the horizontal of the earth, but begin to engage the entire environment. With the endless environment as the ground for the frozen gesture, she embraced the notion of theatricality and all that it implies—temporality, performance, personality, media exploitation. She transformed the place of exhibition into an environment, a site awaiting a Happening. The excitement of these works is a function of the unconscious anticipation of such an event; they signaled a return to issues which had been carefully pruned from American art for a generation.

This anticipation of a temporal episode in her work, combined with her emerging conception of the frozen gesture as a free act, tipped Benglis to the use of video, though video was then being widely explored in terms of technological appeal. A kinetic result from a static impulse should not be surprising. Warhol, of course, preceded Benglis in this understanding when he moved from the seriality of, say, the Marilyns or the Brillo boxes to the sequential frame of filmstrip.

Benglis first used video equipment while teaching at the University of Rochester in 1970. She rejected the utopian ambitions of a generation of artists absorbed by the creation of the video synthesizers. Instead, she was drawn to the unselective recording of the actual as it happens, free of esthetics or ideology, a kind of mindless one-to-one. Spatial superimpositions—piling image on image—interest her. These blurry overlaps deal with transposed seriality—not the lateral seriality or modularity of the Minimalist grid, though surely this is a source—but an in-depth seriality which takes time, blur, static, and transient environmental interferences into account—an imagery with memory built-in. Benglis' video piles up imagery in Expressionist terms similar to the way she throws paint or mounds foam. For Benglis, video is ubiquitous and expendable, like magnetic sound tape that; when it is recycled to record new information, effaces the old. Thus it renders expendable the very notion of the artwork.

"I got involved with video. I saw it was a big macho game, a big, heroic, Abstract Expressionist, macho sexist game. It's all about territory. How big?" Video offered Benglis a perfect medium of gesture freed from materiality; thus gesture could be as large as possible. This contradicts the prevailing view of the artist as singlemindedly devoted to eccentric substances and physical processes.

At the same time that Benglis grasped the implicit scalelessness of Post-Minimalism (and found in video a medium devoid of issues of scale since it was immaterial), she abandoned the comparatively small latex or foam work for the cavernlike environment. The environments (*For Darkness*, *Totem*, *Phantom*, *Pinto*), constructed at numerous galleries and museums, actualize the cave, spilling grottolike forms well out into real space, often enclosing the visitor. Benglis poured and tossed polyurethane foam across inflated scaffolds which were subsequently removed. Since the foam sets quickly, the material needs no internal armatures; the works are supported by the real walls of the exhibition space. Some pieces employ a neutral color range. Others are hyped up with day-glo. Benglis sought theatrical special effects, adding phosphorescent salts to her pigments like those in rotting woods, lichens, and certain minerals. Under various lights or at special times, these grottolike formations glow "like relics from the natural history of some imaginary planet."[5] Again, the model for this rediscovery of the ritual site is Pollock. Nancy Graves, whose early work particularly is marked by a fascination with shamanism and the archeological site, made a similar rediscovery. Their position reintegrates the present with a precultural past.

Certain issues then stand clear in Benglis' work: she is fascinated with substance and eccentric materials as a function of Expressionist sensibility, and she takes pleasure in vulgarity, which is central to Pop. At Benglis' exhibition of metallized knots at the Clocktower last winter, for example, the artist, mindful of the holiday season, draped the balustrades with flashing Christmas lights. This colorism was specific to the occasion, but it also continues the eccentric coloration in Benglis' other work. The Christmas lights, the spangle and sparkle, the powdered metallic dusts, are a kind of infantile and magical coloration that violates "adult" notions of taste and artistic decorum.

Although Benglis is a southerner by birth, these tawdry cosmetic colors evidence the unapologetic, unrepentant range of California taste. She chooses glinting metallic flecks and plastic substances like the automotive sheens of art in Southern California, where she spends a good part of the year.

The announcements for Benglis' exhibitions, like her choice of colors, function as infra-information. Rather than reproducing a work on the announcement of her 1974 exhibition of knots at Paula Cooper Gallery, she sent out a Hollywood style chromo of herself—a cheesecake shot from the rear, blue jeans dropped below her knees. An earlier exhibition invitation pictured the artist as a child dressed for a party in Greek *evzon* costume. The cheesecake shot—in part homage to Betty Grable pinups—recalls for me a late version of Odilon Redon's *Birth of Venus*. Though this work can hardly have been in her mind, Benglis is strongly interested in Classical myth. Among her most recent works are pornographic polaroids rendered ambiguous by their cultural context—they are parodies of Mannerist and Hellenistic postures. Il Rosso Fiorentino and ithyphallic kraters, a Leda without a swan. Robert Morris is her companion in several of these photographs, and in fact her cheesecake invitation is the pendant to his recent S-M fantasy poster announcement, which in turn references recent videotapes done conjointly. Morris exemplifies in stringent terms another intellectual artist attracted and repelled by instances of brute irrationality; something of Benglis' free-floating openness seems sympathetic to this conflicted outlook.

In the work of both artists, overt sexuality points to a covert content—an ironic self-parody of sexuality, and not the exteriorization of a root eroticism. Benglis' sexual photographs are not to be confused with Vito Acconci's performances on erotic themes, although from the early '70s on, Acconci had provided a sensational model of this kind of disclosure. Superficially, Benglis' work reveals the tasteful, the glossy, and the narcissistic, while Acconci's secret sexual systems are more populist, and tend toward the squalid, the exorcistic, and the puritanical.

The distanced experience of instinct lends Benglis' and Morris' sexual work its Mannerist edge. Writing of Morris' S-M poster, Gilbert-Rolfe observed that it was "an ironic encapsulation" of the artist's position, and noted that the poster "concentrates on the artist's identity as a performer within an institution of a certain sort." The critic observes that this "implicitly heroic identity . . . can only be credibly maintained if it's capable of self-parody. Without that capacity, one is left with a rhetoric that doesn't possess the ability to question itself."[6]

Both the explicit and disguised sexual orientation of Benglis' media exploitation remains a function of the frozen gesture. It has become the big risk. In Benglis' work, the new medium is now "the media." What is fascinating is the degree to which the artist, so sharply conscious of risk and stakes, perhaps remains unsure of the jackpot. I suspect she sees it as part of the mythical payoff that was Andy Warhol's by the end of the '60s. But to insist on this interpretation alone is to render base an equivocal activity which, though hardly neutral, is nonetheless disinterested in the way that all art is—however hard that may be to believe of the new erotic work. The problem with Benglis is not one of her creative blockage, but rather of the inadequacies of criticism to keep perspective without falling into mere reportage.

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NOTES

1. There are nevertheless traceable groups of work in Benglis' career—the wax lozenges, the knots, and the environments of tossed polyurethane foam, for example—these are types to which she will intermittently return. There is also the persistent Warholianism which lurks behind her formal choices. That too is a constant. The iconographic sets were examined at some length in Klaus Kertess, "Foam Structures," *Art and Artists*, May, 1972 , pp. 32–37. This sensitive article addressed the link between formal choice and female consciousness in Benglis' work.

2. Emily Wasserman, "New York: Group Show, Bykert Gallery," *Artforum*, September, 1969, pp. 60–61. In an exhibition catalogue for "Materials and Methods: A New View," held at the Katonah Gallery in the Spring of 1971, I maintained that "the disintegration of Minimalism" was the central operation of the period circa 1967–70. This supplanting of a key '60s style was achieved through "a need for identifying sculpture in pictorial terms—particularly with regard to color and unusual substance." This exhibition included the work of Keith Sonnier, Eva Hesse, Richard Van Buren, Alan Saret, and Dorothea Rockburne, although it could have as easily included works by Benglis.

3. Quoted in S. R. Dubrowin, " Latex—One Artist's Raw Material," *Rubber Developments*, Volume 24, No.1 , 1971, pp. 10–12. Post Minimalism's connections to Jackson Pollock are widely acknowledged. A popular piece of reportage on Lynda Benglis, Van Buren, Serra, and Hesse, "Fling, Dribble and Drip," *Life*, February 27, 1970, stressed this affiliation.

4. Although this specific detail is not pointed to, Lawrence Alloway recently reopened the issue of ritual literary content in his "Residual Sign Systems in Abstract Expressionism," *Artforum*, November, 1973. How this access would be facilitated through Jungian psychoanalysis is explained in Judith Wolfe, "Jungian Aspects of Jackson Pollock's Imagery," *Artforum*, November, 1972.

5. Hilton Kramer, *New York Times*, May 30, 1971. Kramer was covering the opening of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where he found "the most arresting [work] was Lynda Benglis' enormous and altogether macabre sculptural environment consisting of 10 bizarre black shapes that append from the wall . . . this is the most impressive work of its kind I have seen since Louise Nevelson first exhibited her black walls in the nineteen-fifties . . . ." A black-and-white videotape was made of the process of such an installation, "Totem (Lynda Benglis Paints with Foam)," by Annie McIntosh, taped at the Hayden Gallery, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, November, 1972.

6. "The Complication of Exhaustion," *Artforum*, September, 1974.

Lynda Benglis, *For Bob*. 1971. Purified pigmented beeswax and dammar resin on Masonite. 36 x 5¼ x 2⅝ in. (91.44 x 13.34 x 6.67 cm). The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Gift of Blake Byrne.

ARCHITECTURE OF MOTION:

LYNDA BENGLIS IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER SHULTZ

OLIVER SHULTZ:

Lynda, when I think about your work, I always go back to the Robert Pincus-Witten essay about you from the 1970s, "The Frozen Gesture." I think he was really onto something with that text.

LYNDA BENGLIS:

I gave him that phrase, "The Frozen Gesture."

OS: That's what made him a good critic. He listened to artists.

LB: Absolutely. Also, there was a perverseness about him. He delighted in being perverse, and I like that too.

OS: *[Laughs]* That doesn't surprise me. I'm all for perversity.

LB: What is always inside-out and how can you really look at something unless you think perversely? You have to look at every bit of the truth.

OS: Artists teach us how to look perversely at the world. No one more than you. I think that's a gift.

LB: Well that's a very perverse statement.

OS: Truly. Lynda, I'm so excited for this show. The works feel perfect for the space and the context. Especially being downtown in Tribeca. When you stand outside the entrance to the gallery, if you turn and look down Broadway, you can see the Clocktower, where you had your legendary solo exhibition in 1973–1974.

LB: I've always loved that. When I did the Christmas lights [for the Clocktower], that's the first thing I was looking at—or looking toward. The two highways and the space. I saw the blinking lights and I said, "This is the perfect thing to light up my works." And so they went on blinking all the time at the show.

OS: I didn't know it was the lights of the highway that inspired the choice to have the Christmas lights wrapping all around the room?

Installation view of *Lynda Benglis: Sparkle Knots*, December 6, 1973–January 19, 1974, The Clocktower Gallery, New York. MoMA PS1 Archives, II.A.21. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. INPS1.14.1. Photograph by Nathan Rabin.

LB: No, it was the reverse. It was the lights of the Clocktower that I was lighting up. In other words I lit up the whole Clocktower from within.

OS: I love those images of that show, with the Sparkle Knot sculptures. I have to imagine that the blinking Christmas lights activated the Sparkles.

LB: Absolutely, that's what happened. You got it. It was a lot of fun at that time.

OS: That was certainly a time of a lot of possibility.

LB: It was, it's true. I was able to step on Richard Serra's toes.

OS: I'm a fan of anyone who does that!

LB: I did literally do it. I had some good French boots, or Italian. I just remember they were kind of red and they had a dull heel—it wasn't a stiletto type heel. They were designer boots, and probably Saint Laurent. What I did was, he [Richard] was talking with me, and another artist came in, sharing news and gossip. And it pissed me off that he was ignoring her. So I stepped on his toes as hard as I could. She was coming in looking very meek and it kind of upset me. So I just got pissed off and stepped on his toes as a reaction. I had always wanted to do it anyway, but you know, the way he held court, I was able to let it out.

OS: How did he react?

LB: Well, he said: "Why did you do that!?" I said, "Well, I'm from the South and that's the way we flirt." And he bought it. So that was OK. You know, I loved Richard Serra. He was a gentleman after all.

OS: Well I'm glad to hear that!

LB: I always liked him. I guess what it was is that he had a whole coterie of women and maybe I was tired of hearing about it. It could've been a love-hate thing. I don't know. But I can tell you that I had big admiration for him anyway. I'm glad he didn't give me a black eye.

OS: *[Laughs]* I agree with you, I love his work and I've always loved it. But I think of you and he as two sides of a kind of dialectic in the 1970s: whereas his work is so, let's say—

LB: Macho!

OS: Yes, Macho. You, on the other hand, manage to use materials that were soft, pliable, fluid, and yet present them with as much force as anything Richard ever created.

LB: Well, I'm glad you say that. You know, I took logic in school. I loved it. I could've gone that way. But logic is basically a dead end. You read about philosophy and I thought art was more interesting, that's all. Because we all live under systems.

OS: There's so much thought in what you do. The philosophical implications of your work are deep and vast and rich. But at the same time, just as interesting and important—or maybe even more important, in some ways—is the unthought, or the impossible to put into words, or that which is not logical. That, for me, has to do with your engagement with materials and physical things.

LB: You got it, kid!

OS: For me that's connected to your interest in knots. Knots are like philosophical problems. These new works may not be knots per se, but they feel knotty.

LB: Well, it's the curve of the finger of Michelangelo's David. I looked at the finger and the curve of it, and I thought, that curve says it all. His curves are just right. That section of a curve. It describes everything in the world. Somehow, we can't get rid of it either.

OS: It's embedded too deep in our DNA, culturally. But in this case, you're not working with marble. You're working with paper—you've used paper for a long time. What do you love about it?

Michelangelo Buonarroti, *David*. 1501–1504. Marble. Galleria dell'Accademia di Firenze.

LB: First of all, I think, mush. I think of crush and mush. I think of skin. I think of pulling—the plasticity. I think of this spontaneity in absorption. I think of the possibility of color and not color. I think of history. In fact, we wouldn't have history, really, in a certain way, without it. That history couldn't survive without paper. It's beyond context.

OS: One of the things I love about what you do, Lynda, is that you work with abstraction. But abstraction isn't some realm divorced from reality, history, meaning—those things are totally embedded in the life of the materials.

LB: Absolutely. I cannot tear myself away from the reality of the everyday. That's all of our situation. It's both hell and heaven.

OS: These dualities are somehow always embedded in what you do. There also seems to be a kind of absolute ecstasy or pleasure in the materials. When I think about how you made these works, it seems to have a lot to do with just allowing the material—the paper—to be what it is.

LB: Absolutely. It's a dance. It's playing with rhythms.

OS: Rhythms in the sense that—

LB: You dance with the curve. You dance with the plasticity. You dance with the chemistry. You dance with the space and with time.

OS: It does feel like the forms are constantly in motion.

LB: These are all things that I need to see in the work. If I look at a painting, I need to see the reflection of the gesture in the motion. I need to see the light—the change of light—what was before and after. I need to see the contact or what the contact is.

OS: It seems like looking—seeing—is just as important as the actual making.

LB: It's one and the same. That's why I think I'm truly an existentialist.

OS: I agree. When it comes to these works—the actual forms that they create, which are so lusciously curvilinear and undulating and cascading, turning into themselves, while also exploding out of themselves at the same time in a fascinating, endlessly mesmerizing way—these forms are also produced, as I understand it, almost by chance, because of the way the Abaca paper shrinks as it dries.

LB: You're totally correct. I think chance always plays into it. But it's chance within a context. You could change that context and turn it [around]. I could change it and make it into a watercolor phenomena. I keep thinking, when am I going to do that with the colored paper? I think maybe that could be next. Maybe it's not needed. What I find, when I go back to my studio, what I find so interesting, is the idea of flesh. Paper as flesh. Paper as skin. When I look at it in that way, I find it so infinitely transforming. It's almost like it's crying. It's crying. It's disintegrating. It's forgotten. But it's active.

OS: There's a whole poetics of skin in this work, and skinning.

LB: That's it.

OS: Tell me about how the folks at Dieu Donné, working in the paper mill, laid down the structure of the sculptures—the bamboo or the wire—that would become the skeleton to the paper?

LB: I suggested the structure being essential to the form on the second go-round because it was much more interesting.

OS: The forms you achieve are so organic. They are ultimately determined more by the materials than by anything else. It's almost like taking a piece of wood out of the forest. You didn't decide what that wood would look like. But you decided it was your art.

LB: Totally. I'm thinking about wood itself. You say wood. I went out to my studio recently. A person out there had removed my trees and made lumber out of them. That was shocking to me, that my tree had been taken down.

OS: This was a surprise to you? You weren't expecting it?

LB: Yeah. I didn't ask him, necessarily, to do it.

OS: That seems rather violent.

LB: It is violent. It was just one tree that needed water. I look at the tree, it was growing, and it looked a little wilted. Trees do that when they need water right away. You have to save them.

OS: I could see that being a disturbing experience. Trees are living beings and part of our lives. You cut them down and that's maybe the end of a certain kind of possibility. In the case of that particular tree, it's one sort of tree, but of course the Abaca is a kind of tree also.

LB: Yes, that's it. It's beautiful. It's the outer part of it.

OS: It's the skin of the tree.

LB: That's the most sensitive part of our body, I have to say, and I can feel it [in the work].

OS: It's such a powerful interface with the world, the skin. It's where we meet the world. It's porous. It's not a fixed boundary. Things go through it; they go in and out of it. To bring it back to your sculpture, I think it's interesting that there's a long tradition of Abaca being made into clothes, into various types of textiles, it's a material that can do a lot of things. It's very strong. So the idea of using it to make sculpture seems to make a lot of sense. But let me ask: Lynda, why did you choose to use the names of moths and butterflies as the titles of the works?

LB: We named them all together. I took this input. We enjoyed that process and had a lot of fun.

OS: So much of your work, going back to the mid 1970s, is based on these collaborations, which you kind of orchestrate. But you are also open to the way other people—or other entities, even—contribute. So these sculptures are a collaboration with the materials as well.

LB: Yes, it's a collab.

OS: Going back to the butterflies, I think about Dubuffet, who used butterfly wings, and made works with them. They're beautiful, but there's also a kind of tragedy to them.

LB: Yes, it's true.

OS: And you talk about skin so much, I also think also about the idea of flaying. One of my favorite paintings is Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*. These sculptures, they also feel flayed somehow. As if the skin has been taken off the body and opened up. That painting is made in the late stage of Titian's life. His eyes are not what they once were, but somehow because of this lack—which obviates the need to depict everything as crisp and perfectly as he once had—Titian achieves a kind of sublime beauty.

LB: Well said. That's interesting.

OS: Sometimes, it feels as though there is some deep pain, or lack, that opens up a kind of revelatory beauty. The butterfly-like quality of these sculptures seems to be connected to that for me.

LB: I still have my eyesight without glasses. I try to continue to use my eyes without glasses. With glasses on, of course, I'm relieved if I have to read something in front of me. But generally, I'm resisting leaving my eyesight.

OS: I can see that. Not only the way you've chosen and orchestrated these forms, but also the color. Something we haven't talked about is your use of color in these works. There are two different kinds of works in the series—those that are black and white and those with saturated colors.

LB: The ones with saturated colors are the ones that I mentioned before. They were created by Dieu Donné. It's their fiftieth anniversary, which is why we did the collaboration. They created the first color combinations [and] added the lightning bolt at my request, because I wanted to add something that made it pre-destined, so to speak. In other words, I handed them a lightning bolt like a magician would. And then I went on to collaborate, because that's what we were doing. And that was fine. You don't always choose what food you put on your platter, or what platter you choose for your food. We take in many things in different ways.

OS: The elements that are gestural painting—black in most cases—was that done after the forms were made, or when the sheets were still flat?

LB: Well, that's what I added. First of all, they were kind of polka dots, because I began to play. What's better than a dot, you know? I decided to paint them all in one gesture, like I was some kind of bird laying eggs, or putting dots on an egg. To me it was like an easter egg hunt. It was a collab. Doing designs on easter eggs.

OS: Unlike easter eggs, though, in these works the design, ornament, and structure feel as though they are fused together. It feels like one and the same.

LB: Well yes, water and paper are paper.

OS: It feels like a quail egg or a spotted chicken egg. Even if it's true that you decorated the sculptures, added some additional visual element to them, that ornamentation is also embedded physically in the structure at the same time. It feels essential.

LB: For me, it's like having an ensemble. Ensembles are more interesting, often, than orchestras, because you get to the meat of the thing. You get to the structure of the instruments. This was a kind of ensemble, in a way. I couldn't have done it without [Dieu Donné].

OS: And of course, you couldn't have made your bronze sculptures without the foundry.

LB: It's a little bit different… But not much different. You're right. Finally, what I'm taking into the foundry, for instance—I'm taking a piece that I made in clay, and I was wrestling with that clay, and I made that clay look like it did, because I wrestled with it in that way. For me it was just a piece of skin. I made the skin into a structure. But it was true that the context, the collaboration, the surroundings, [were all part of it.] We extruded the clay. I functioned as an interpreter, making doughnuts basically. Tying knots, tying this and that, tying skin. All of that. I think I exposed what my ideas were through the use of the clay.

OS: I think it's so much the metaphor of skin and skinning and the skin of things as a way of being in relation to the world.

LB: True. But to have form, you have to have mass. I'm not opposed to mass. In fact, if the material is flexible enough, you can make the mass through layering. That's what I've done. In this particular situation I think of myself as making architecture out of material motion. Something that needs to be in motion. Do you understand?

OS: I do. It makes me think about the word "architecture" and where it comes from in Greek. Two words, you probably know this. It comes from *techne*—which means technique, craft, or even art—and *arche*, which means order.

LB: That's nice. Yes. You're right. That's what you could describe this conversation as being. We keep going back—as an outline, almost.

Installation view of *Lynda Benglis: An Alphabet of Forms*, May 5–July 2, 2021, at Pace Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

Installation view of *Lynda Benglis: An Alphabet of Forms*, May 5–July 2, 2021, at Pace Gallery, New York. Courtesy the artist and Pace Gallery.

OS: And as much as you moved away from being a logician, and the sort of rigors and orders of logic, the extruder is a tool of order. The reeds, the bamboo, the wire, those also introduce a kind of order, around which the chaos of the Abaca paper takes shape.

LB: That's true. Of course, the paper did not have an extruder. It was a mass of mush. It all comes from [my childhood]—in the third grade, there were little boys. Louisiana would flood. My dad would come get me in one of the trucks of this company. Because a big truck would flounder in the flood, people [often] got around in motorboats when it flooded in the rice fields of Louisiana. We had houses on stilts. We had systems for plumbing, but we didn't have any systems for the flooding of the rice fields. So finally they figured out how to pump water around Louisiana. It was, you know, a marsh of rice patches.

So I've always been involved [with water]. I remember the boys having shorts, or rolling up their blue jeans. They were playing in the mud up to their waist. They were mushing around in this mud with glee. I didn't join them, but I was really amused by it, and I never forgot it. It was such fun. And that's what we were doing. All my life, I mean. Mud pies before that. Mud hills in Mississippi with the clay, the sand and pine needles. I made little houses. Basically furniture, rounded, half-forms, so that I could sit on them and play house. The pine needles were the structure. The pine cones were there, part of the collection. All this sort of play in the mud was very important to me.

OS: In a way you've never stopped, have you, playing in the mud?

LB: *[Laughs]* No.

OS: I'm so grateful for that.

OCTOBER 5, 2023

Figure of Eighty, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 13" × 17" × 7"

Palpita Vitrealis, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 35" × 28" × 8"

Lead Belle, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, carbon black with acrylic medium 42" × 21" × 7"

Cream-spot Tiger, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded copper wire and bamboo reed, carbon black with acrylic medium 17" × 27" × 7"

Belted Beauty, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, carbon black with acrylic medium 28" × 24" × 5"

Heath Rivulet, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded copper and silver wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 12" × 12" × 7"

Silurian, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 28" × 23" × 8"

Apple Leaf Skeletonizer, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 29" × 19" × 11"

Dark Bordered Beauty, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 18" × 16" × 8"

Licorice Piercer, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 24" × 14" × 9"

Dingy Shell, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, carbon black with acrylic medium 30" × 29" × 5"

Angle Shades, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 31" × 12" × 7"

Feathered Thorn, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, carbon black with acrylic medium 43" × 25" × 9"

Ground Lackey, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, carbon black with acrylic medium 28" × 16" × 11"

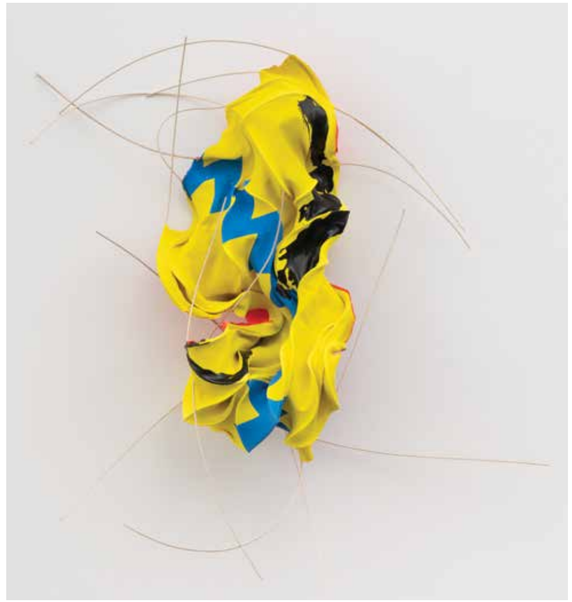
Brimstone, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium, sparkles 26" × 16" × 8"

Reed Leopard, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium 47" × 29" × 7"

Maiden's Blush, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 12" × 10" × 7"

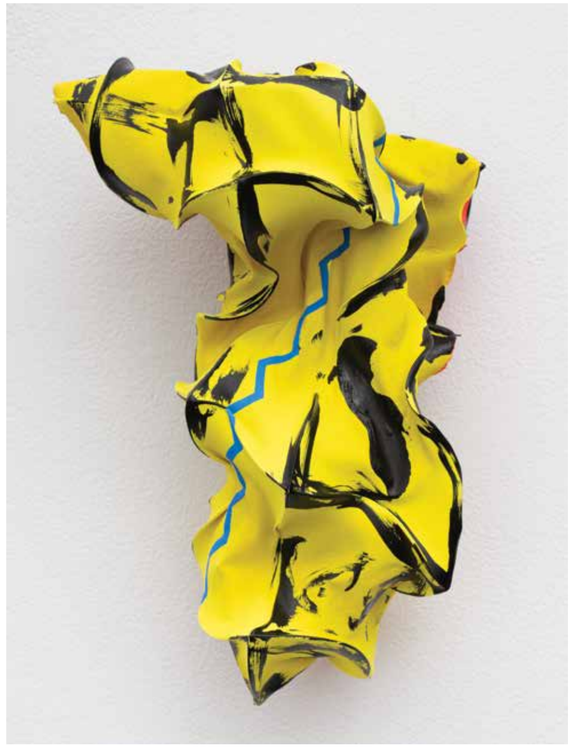
Red Sword-grass, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 27" × 22" × 9"

Festoon, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 23" × 18" × 9"



Thrift Clearwing, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 34" × 31" × 10"

Clouded Border, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 31" × 17" × 12"



Brindled Beauty, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 15" × 8" × 6"

The Vestal, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 16" × 8" × 7"

Northern Rustic, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium 16" × 10" × 7"

Heart and Dart, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium
25" × 18" × 12"

Yellow Horned, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire and bamboo reed, metallic pigment, acrylic 29" × 22" × 8"

Vapourer, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, metallic pigment, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium 27" × 33" × 5"

Buff Ermine, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, metallic pigment, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium
25" × 23" × 10"

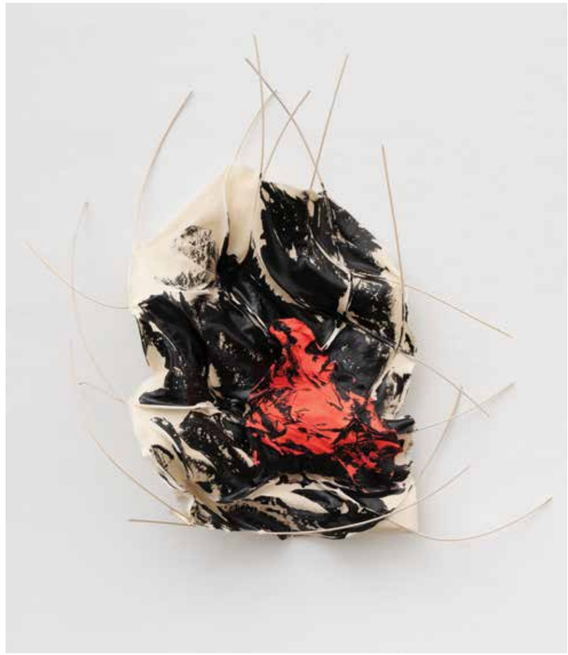
Weaver's Wave, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, metallic pigment, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium, sparkles, cast sparkles on handmade paper 34" × 24" × 8"

Latticed Heath, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, metallic pigment, carbon black with acrylic medium 29" × 22" × 4"

Pretty Pinion, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, pigmented abaca, embedded aluminum wire, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium
25" × 18" × 9"

Merveille du Jour, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded aluminum wire, metallic pigment, stenciled linen pulp paint, carbon black with acrylic medium
29" × 21" × 8"

Lichen Button, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium
17" × 10" × 8"



Bloxworth Snout, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium
28" × 25" × 9"

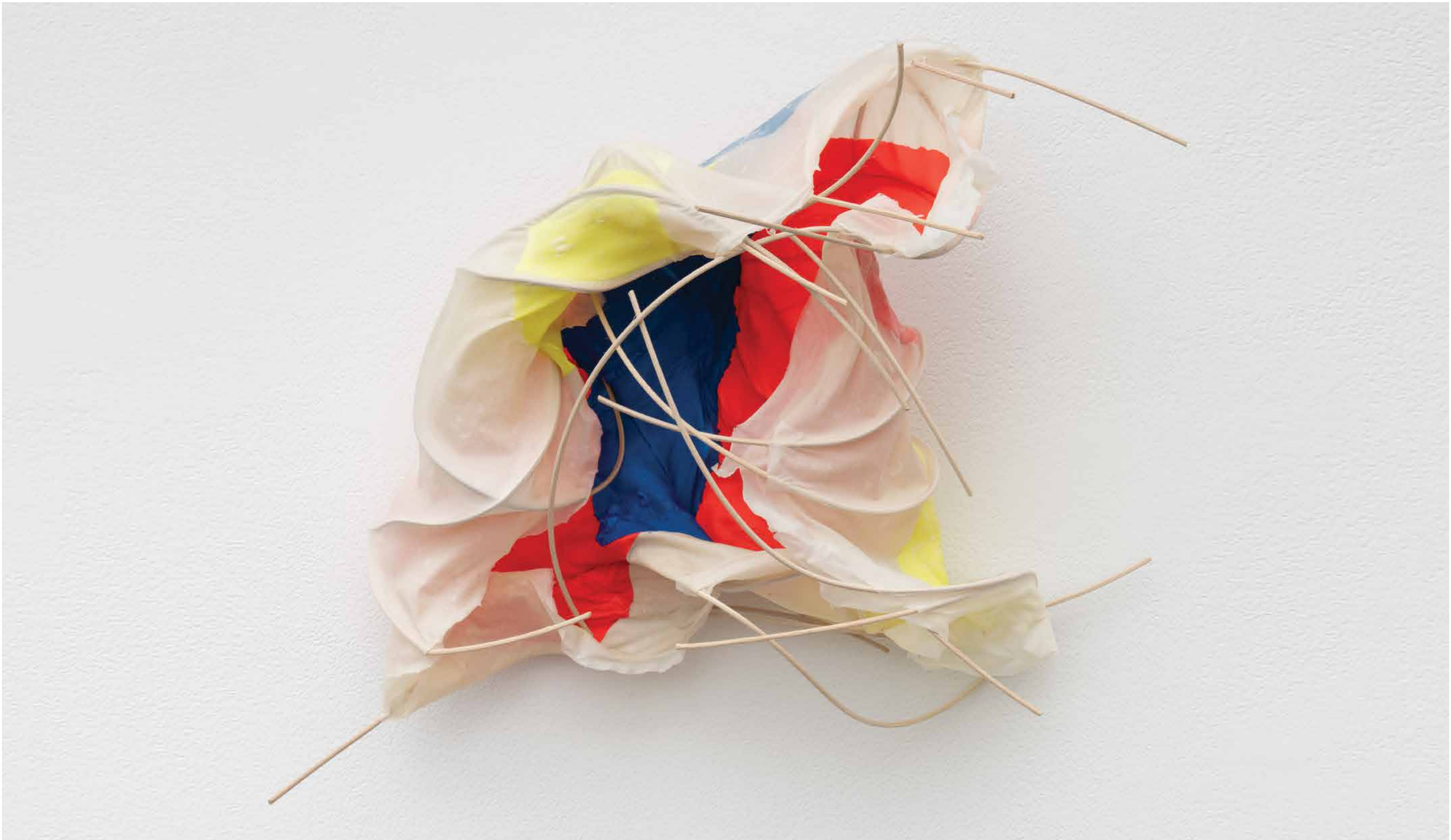
Treble Bar (Minor), 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium 30" × 23" × 9"

Drab Looper, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium
29" × 17" × 12"

Pale Tussock, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium
22" × 21" × 10"

Dusky Hook-tip, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium 20" × 15" × 10"

Cloaked Minor, 2023. Handmade pigmented abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, metallic pigment, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium 27" × 22" × 13"



Map-winged Swift, 2023. Handmade abaca paper, embedded bamboo reed, stenciled linen pulp paint, wet collaged pigmented abaca, carbon black with acrylic medium 17" × 19" × 9"

Lynda Benglis with her dog, Cleo, New Mexico, 2021. Photo: Grace Roselli, Pandora's BoxX Project.

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November 4, 2023–January 13, 2024

The works in this exhibition were realized to mark
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Cover image: The grapeleaf skeletonizer (*Harrisina americana*), a moth in the family Zygaenidae. It is widespread in the eastern half of the United States, and commonly noticed defoliating grapes, especially of the Virginia creeper. Members of this family all produce HCN (hydrogen cyanide), a potent antipredator toxin. (Source: Wikipedia. Image: https://www.butterfliesandmoths.org/sighting_details/1363526)

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